INTRODUCTION

Environmental History in Western Australia before 1980

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Amateur and professional historians both contributed to the evolution of environmental history in Western Australia. While due recognition must be made of the influence of international and eastern Australian scholarship, the historical geographers in particular, it remains the case that much of the impetus for recognising the importance of environmental factors in the Western Australian past came from historians working locally. This should not be surprising in a society of recent European origin which until the 1960s depended on wool and wheat as major staples. Researchers tracing historical change over the relatively brief period of settlement since 1829 could not help observing rapid transformations of landscape and ecology during that period. It was maybe also relevant that even the residents of the capital city, Perth, lived with Kings Park as what was considered an icon of natural bush, although in reality one that had undergone considerable modification.

The observers came from a variety of sources. The proceedings of the [Royal][1] Western Australian Historical Society founded in 1926 included from its beginnings members whose rural experience enabled them to make practical observations on local environmental change. As early as 1927 Mary Farrelly and H.K. Maley drew attention to an enlightened initiative of Maitland Brown, as resident magistrate of Geraldton in the early 1870s. Confronted with the encroachment of sandhills on the town area, he set the unemployed to plant native shrubs and trees extensively around the outskirts of Geraldton, earning the praise of Governor Weld.[2] Later contributors to the Historical Society, among

1 The Western Australian Historical Society was granted the right of including 'Royal' in its name in 1963.

2 M. Farrelly and H.K. Maley, 'The Greenough District', *Journal of the Historical Society of Western Australia,* vol. 1, no. 2, 1927, p. 34; P. Cowan, *Maitland Brown: A View of Nineteenth Century Western Australia,* Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1988, pp. 137-9.

them Robert Cranfield and Margaret McAleer, noted the backwardness of farm technology for much of the nineteenth century and consequent environmental degradation.[3] None of these papers amounted to a systematic exploration of the environmental impact of British settlement in Western Australia, but collectively they provided useful building blocks for the future.

Further advances in understanding emerged from research in several sections of The University of Western Australia. Not surprisingly the agricultural scientists were among the pioneers. The first publication in this field with a major historical dimension came about somewhat fortuitously during the 1939–45 war, when the Commonwealth Department of Post-war Reconstruction commissioned Sheila Rowley to draw up a research report on land settlement in Western Australia from 1890 to 1942.[4] The genesis of this project is hard to determine; one would like to speculate that the presence in Canberra of such enterprising Western Australians as H.C. Coombs and Paul Hasluck had something to do with it. The report was produced by the end of the war. I have not had the opportunity of tracing its effects on the rural reconstruction policies of the immediate post-war years, but it had little immediate influence on historical research in Western Australia.

Under the leadership of E.J. Underwood, Dean of the Faculty of Agriculture from 1946 to 1970, postgraduate research expanded. Several theses included historical content. D.K. Giles examined land use in a section of the Avon Valley.[5] Henry Schapper in 1953 submitted a master's thesis surveying dairy farming in the South-West and in 1955 took his doctorate for a survey of wheat and sheep farming in the eastern wheatbelt. These studies were to lay the foundations of a distinguished, if at times controversial, career as agricultural economist and critic of farm management practices, but their historical content was largely incidental to the analysis of contemporary problems.[6] In 1964 N.E. Mouritz followed Rowley and Schapper in his analysis of the trend over time towards farms of larger size, but here again the historical content was subordinate to the practical issues of the present.[7]

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3 For example A.E. Murray-Gordon, 'Pioneering Days in the Eastern Wheatbelt', *Journal of the Historical Society of Western Australia,* vol. 4, no. 4, 1952, p. 76; M. McAleer, 'Some Aspects of the Development of the Northern Wheatbelt', *Journal of the Historical Society of Western Australia*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1955, p. 45; R. Stephens, 'The Mingenew Story', *Journal of the Historical Society of Western Australia*, vol. 5, no. 4, 1956, p. 59; R.E. Cranfield, 'The Lefroys at Walebing', *Journal of the Historical Society of Western Australia*, vol. 5, no. 5, 1959, p. 42; D. Williams, 'The Goomalling Story', *Journal of the Historical Society of Western Australia* , vol. 5, no. 6, 1959, p. 1. The list is not exhaustive.

4 S. Rowley, 'Land settlement in 1890 to 1942: with some consideration of the future', Research Report to the Minister for Post-War Reconstruction, 1943. A copy was lodged in what is now the Reid Library, The University of Western Australia, but was later moved to the new science library.

5 D.K. Giles, 'Some Aspects of Land Use in a Part of the Avon Valley', Master's thesis, The University of Western Australia, 1950.

6 H.P. Schapper, 'A Survey of Dairy Farming in the South-West of Western Australia', Master's thesis, The University of Western Australia, 1953 and 'A Survey of Sheep and Wheat Farming in the Eastern Wheat Belt of Western Australia', PhD thesis, The University of Western Australia, 1955.

7 N.E. Mouritz, 'An Examination of Patterns and Trends in the Size of Farms in the South-West

Simultaneously, but apparently without much interaction with the agricultural scientists, the Department of History at The University of Western Australia was producing the first studies in which an environmental aspect might be discerned. Many graduates with a history major were schoolteachers, some of whom used a posting to a rural destination to conduct historical research on the locality where they found themselves. The PhD in history was not established until after the advent of F.K. Crowley as lecturer in Australian history in 1952, but before that date some creditable work was done in the form of honours or MA theses.

The outstanding advance towards environmental history was made by Tom Sten, whose Master of Arts thesis submitted in 1943 was entitled 'Agricultural development in the Hay River area of Western Australia'.[8] Although somewhat remote from the main agricultural districts of Western Australia, the Hay River district north of Albany was settled as early as the 1840s. The district was served by no railway and gave rise to no significant town. The pioneer families mostly remained in the district, lending it a stability which tended to lapse into a stagnant conservatism. Sten cited the example of a family who in seventy-two years cleared no more than 160 acres (about 65 hectares) of their property. They stinted on investment in improvements, preferring to remain free of debt. 'By 1927 the native grasses were largely eaten out; attempts to introduce prairie grass, timothy, white clover and other exotics had largely failed; the land was neither rested, ploughed, or fertilized.'[9] Shepherding practices with the use of hurdles were followed for many years before investment in fencing. Sten was not able to follow up this historical research as in 1945 he became principal of the Teachers' Training College at a demanding time of post-war growth.

A.C. (Charles) Staples was another who developed the insights drawn from an observant study of local history to draw conclusions about environmental change. He had long-standing family connections with his research area, the Harvey district, following his original postgraduate thesis with thirty years of well informed scholarly inquiry.[10] Staples drew attention to the development during the nineteenth century of the practice of transhumance, as the first generations of graziers learned to shift their livestock seasonally from summer grazing on the coastal lowlands to winter pastures on the alluvial country at the foot of the Darling scarp. This practice to some extent countered the 'coasty' condition affecting cattle too long pastured on the lowlands—for the lack of trace elements such as cobalt and zinc was not to be identified until the 1930s.

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of Western Australia With Implications for the Future', Master's thesis, The University of Western Australia, 1964.

8 T. Sten, 'Agricultural Development in the Hay River Area of Western Australia', Master's thesis, The University of Western Australia, 1943.

9 G.C. Bolton and D. Hutchison, 'European Man in Southwestern Australia', *Journal of the Royal Society of Western Australia,* vol. 56, no. 1-2, 1973, p. 59, paraphrasing from original.

10 A.C. Staples, 'The Historical Development of the Harvey District up to 1895', Master's thesis, The University of Western Australia, 1948; A.C. Staples, *They Made Their Destiny: History of Settlement of the Shire of Harvey 1829-1929*, Shire of Harvey, 1979.

Staples also made some interesting observations on the effects of drainage and irrigation on agricultural practice.

My own research on the history of the Kimberley pastoral industry[11] led me in similar directions. At first I undertook this research topic partly to explore the relevance of Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis to Australian conditions, following a theme dear to my professor, Frederick Alexander.[12] In the course of my research I came to understand that a major influence on the fortunes of the Kimberley pastoralists had been overgrazing on the fertile frontages of the Fitzroy-Margaret and the Ord. Tracing this process I was able to show that significant erosion was identified not more than twenty years after the first occupation of the country in the mid-1880s, but it was much longer before remedial steps were taken. I was not to be the only historian or historical geographer led by an interest in the frontier thesis to chart the process of environmental change resulting from human activity.

Despite these early foreshadowings a systematic approach to environmental history was not to emerge ahead of the growth of public interest in issues of conservation and environment during the 1950s and 1960s. In Western Australia the development of this awareness can be attributed to a number of local issues: the establishment of a chapter of the National Trust in 1959, the spirited controversy about the infill of the Swan River during the early 1960s, the successful campaign during the mid-1960s to preserve the central arch of the old Barracks, and eventually the passage in 1969–70 of legislation establishing an Environmental Protection Authority which soon showed it had enough power to thwart the establishment of an alumina refinery in the viticultural Swan valley. These changes were not immediately paralleled by innovations on the academic front.

Elsewhere in Australia historical geographers were beginning to focus attention on the processes of environmental change. One of the earliest in the field was T.M. Perry, another who used the frontier thesis as a springboard for his investigation of the impact of settlement.[13] At the Australian National University the Department of Geography was placed in the Research School of Pacific Studies, but the foundation professor, Oskar Spate, equally proficient as geographer and historian, did not take a narrow view of his ambit. Several postgraduates in this department researched and published on Australian subjects with a strong environmental content. Among them R.L. Heathcote made a comparative study of pastoral settlement on both sides of the Queensland–New South Wales border, showing how differing legislation led to differing environmental outcomes.[14] Heathcote was to make a major contribution to

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11 G.C. Bolton, 'History of the Kimberley Pastoral Industry from 1885 to the Present Day', Master's thesis, The University of Western Australia, 1954.

12 F. Alexander, *Moving Frontiers: An American Theme and its Application to Australian History*, Melbourne University Press, 1948.

13 T.M. Perry, *Australia's First Frontier: The Spread of Settlement in New South Wales, 1788-1829*, Melbourne University Press, 1963.

14 R.L. Heathcote, *Back of Bourke: A Study of Land Appraisal and Settlement in Semi-arid Australia*, Melbourne University Press, 1965.

arid lands studies during the next three decades. Independently at Monash University J.M. Powell was embarking on a study of land policy in Victoria during the nineteenth century.[15] Within a decade he was to establish a reputation as Australia's foremost authority on the history of environmental management.

At The University of Western Australia the discipline of geography was for many years represented by the solitary figure of Joseph Gentilli, a scholarly Italian refugee housed somewhat incongruously in the Department of Economics, where he amassed a good deal of valuable material based on the patient analysis of statistics. His studies of climate and crop yields suggested that despite a fairly favourable run of seasons and the application of superphosphate and improved technology, Western Australian wheat yields had not improved since the early years of the twentieth century but at best stood still. In the 1960s his findings had little perceptible influence on State politicians still eager to bring marginal land under the plough.

The creation of a dedicated Department of Geography was followed by the appointment of Martyn Webb as professor in 1964. Brimming with ideas which he urged with energy and enthusiasm, Webb was to become a major presence in the development of urban policy in the ensuing half-century. Philosophically well aware of the differing missions of geography and history, Webb was nevertheless to make, in partnership with his wife Audrey, several substantial contributions to Western Australian regional history.[16] Before long his department was to produce a noteworthy historical geographer in J.M.R. Cameron, whose lifetime work it was to trace the processes by which the first generations of British settlers adapted their farming and grazing practices to the Western Australian environment.[17]

The 1960s were a halcyon period for university growth and development, and it seemed that conditions were ripening for the development of environmental history. For several reasons this did not eventuate at The University of Western Australia. Following Fred Alexander's retirement early in 1966 and Crowley's departure to an Eastern States appointment two years earlier the senior members of the Department, myself included, tended to concentrate on building up strength in non-Australian fields such as medieval British studies and South Asian history. It was felt that Crowley had established foundations in Western Australian history which would influence the research agenda for many years to come.

It was also the case that the University's departmental structure tended to favour the entrenchment of disciplinary fiefdoms. Some examples could be found

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15 J.M. Powell, *The Public Lands of Australia Felix: Settlement and Appraisal in Victoria 1834-1891,* Oxford University Press, 1970.

16 M. and A. Webb, *Edge of Empire,* Artlook Books, 1983; M. and A. Webb, *Golden Destiny: the Centenary History of Kalgoorlie-Boulder and the Eastern Goldfields of Western Australia,* City of Kalgoorlie-Boulder, 1993.

17 Cameron's earliest publications included two articles in the Department of Geography's journal *Australind*, 'Some Comments on the Early Rural Dwelling' *Australind,* vol. 2, 1968, p. 20 and 'Perception and Settlement', *Australind*, vol. 3, 1970, p. 49. His findings were consolidated in *Ambition's Fire: The Agricultural Colonisation of Pre-convict Western Australia,* University of Western Australia Press, 1981.

of co-operation across faculties or departments—the Department of Zoology, for instance, had a good relationship with staff in Agriculture—but there were often impediments to the kind of co-operation that might have fostered an interdisciplinary approach to environmental studies.[18] When advances were made they were often the result of serendipity rather than conscious academic planning. Duncan Merilees, a lecturer in the Faculty of Education, was one of the first to suspect that the 'fire-stick farming' practices of pre-contact Aborigines had a major effect on Australia's megafauna as well as its forests and grasslands; but it was only with the arrival in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology of Sylvia Hallam, who had trained in England in medieval archaeology but who adapted resourcefully to Indigenous research, that he found a colleague who would develop these ideas.[19]

In the late 1960s two Western Australian naturalists hit upon the concept of describing the seasonal variations in plant and animal life over twelve months in one closely observed tract of land in the South-West of Western Australia. This genre had been pioneered by the American environmentalist Aldo Leopold in his *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) but the Western Australians were not then aware of Leopold's work and developed the concept independently.[20] Vincent Serventy, an experienced naturalist, wrote of the Dryandra State Forest, a reserve of some 20,000 hectares south-west of Pingelly set aside in 1934 for growing mallet, a tree useful in tannin production. [21] In a chapter for each month of the year Serventy described the botany, animals, birds and insects likely to be encountered at that season. Beautifully observed, Serventy's essays drew on information from farming families including some historical material; for instance an essay on foxes located the arrival of these predators in the 1920s, about twenty years after the coming of the rabbit.[22] But Serventy was not primarily concerned with chronicling the process of environmental change over time.

A stronger historical sense could be found in Barbara York Main's study of a block of wheatbelt country in the Kellerberrin district. An authority on the spiders of the South-West working with the University's Department of Zoology, Main came from a farming family in the extended catchment area of the Avon-Swan system. *Between Wodjil and Tor* reflected a quality of observation

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18 This is not the place to argue this point in detail, but a few examples from the late 1960s may suffice. When Japanese studies were established in the Faculty of Economics, departments in the Faculty of Arts were rebuffed when they sought to participate. When a member of the Department of Anthropology and Sociology established an honours seminar on the history and sociology of Western Australian wheatbelt communities the Department of History was neither advised nor encouraged to contribute. When Martyn Webb (Geography) approached staff in another faculty to explore opportunities for academic co-operation he was told by the very senior dean of that faculty that he must not make such approaches without first securing the dean's consent.

19 D. Merrilees, 'Man the Destroyer', *Journal of the Royal Society of Western Australia,* vol. 51, no. 1, 1958, p. 1; S. Hallam, *Fire and Hearth: A Study of Aboriginal Usage and European Usurpation in South-Western Australia,* Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1975.

20 A. Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac,* Oxford University Press, 1949.

21 V. Serventy, *Dryandra: The Story of an Australian Forest,* A.H & A.W. Reid, 1970.

22 ibid., pp. 118-19.

comparable to Serventy's and based on lifetime familiarity with the landscape.[23] Main described how the clearance of the native forests of salmon gum and York gum was followed inexorably by increased salt creep. It said something of the state of publishing in Western Australia that such a well crafted book of obvious local importance saw the light of day only because of an enterprising and perceptive Brisbane publisher, Brian Clouston of Jacaranda Press. Clouston later encouraged Main to publish a further book of essays developing the theme of environmental deterioration due to human activity.[24] The public response was less than the book deserved, and Main returned to a long and productive career as a highly respected arachnologist. It would be timely evidence of an improvement in Western Australian publishing if *Between Wodjil and Tor* were to be reprinted. It is a book whose attractions endure.

The disadvantages of working in Western Australia on Western Australian subject matter were also experienced by a scholar of the urban environment, George Seddon. A graduate of The University of Melbourne, George Seddon at thirty was appointed in 1957 to a lectureship in the Department of English at The University of Western Australia. He gained a reputation as a fine scholar and a caustic wit; when one afternoon a colleague from the Department of History bustled into the faculty tea-room proclaiming that he had written fifteen hundred words that day Seddon gently inquired: 'In any particular order?' His intellectual interests were wide-ranging. After an initial revulsion against the dry Mediterranean aspect of the Western Australian bush—it looked, said the Ballarat-bred Seddon, like a landscape with dandruff—he soon came to develop a learned understanding of its remarkable botanical diversity. But when in 1963 he applied for two years' leave in order to work for a doctorate in the United States, he chose geology as his discipline. He explained to his vice-chancellor:

> I have chosen Geology for post-graduate study for various reasons. One is that I find it intrinsically interesting, another that it combines the descriptive sciences and is full of linguistic problems; yet another is that it makes use of an exceptionally wide variety of techniques and approaches, and hence offers a conspectus of scientific processes.[25]

The University of Minnesota awarded him his doctorate for a thesis on the geology of the Devonian period, and after a period at the University of Oregon he returned to Western Australia in 1966. Transferring to the Department of Philosophy he offered a course in the philosophy of science. His professor, Selwyn Grave, soon came to consider him irreplaceable: 'I know of no-one in any university with his range of competence,' wrote Grave, 'even his command of language is remarkable—let alone that range of competence and his liveliness and wit.'[26] Nevertheless in 1969 Seddon's application for promotion to a readership

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23 B.Y. Main, *Between Wodjil and Tor,* Jacaranda Press, 1967.

24 B.Y. Main, *Twice Trodden Ground,* Jacaranda Press, 1971.

25 G. Seddon to S.L. Prescott, 5 February 1963, University of Western Australia (UWA) Archives, S.702:1.

26 S. Grave to S.L. Prescott, 28 February 1969, UWA Archives S.702:1.

was rejected. The variety of his disciplinary interests told against him. As one very senior university figure complained: 'The man doesn't seem to know what his discipline is: geology, philosophy, botany, English …'[27] Admittedly his record of publication was as yet meagre. In those years the Department of English tended to resist prolixity in publication, and Philosophy was only a little more venturesome. Seddon disdained to publish for publication's sake, but he had much in store. Within five years he became probably the only academic in the world to have published in specialist journals in geology and in the major journal of philosophy, *Mind*.[28]

Seddon was concentrating on a project of another kind. His reading in English literature had kindled in him an interest in the topographical essays of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a genre which before the coming of photography required the combination of literary grace and a sharp eye for natural phenomena. Gilbert White's *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne*[29] is an example which has retained readers until the present day. Seddon adapted this tradition to write *Swan River Landscapes,*[30] an aesthetic analysis of the environmental character of the Swan River estuary and the built environment of Perth and its suburbs. His essay was enhanced by the photography of Michal Lewi and the advice of another geologist, Basil Balme.

Seddon's purpose was didactic. He reminded his readers that the term 'ecology' was derived from the Greek word for 'household'. Ecology, he wrote, was the science of good housekeeping.[31] This meant public acceptance of responsibility for exercising stewardship of both the natural environment and of environments shaped by people with due concern for what was appropriate for the geology, climate and botany of the Swan River coastal plain. Instead of cultivating gardens and parks based on rainy England, Western Australians should use native flora intelligently. Buildings and roads should be constructed of materials sympathetic to the local environment. A vernacular shed with a corrugated iron roof might sit better in the landscape than a Californian bungalow. (In old age Seddon spoke with eloquent scorn of some of the opulent 'McMansions' of the western suburbs of Perth). Especial care should be taken to ensure that Perth's growth was governed by a respect for professional design in the preservation of foreshores and open spaces. In the forty years since he wrote Seddon's ideas have won considerable acceptance, but at the time they seemed a welcome challenge to conventional thinking.

Swan River Landscapes won immediate acclaim. Brodie Hall was so pleased with its reception that the Western Mining Corporation committed itself to supporting the publication of a much larger work in which Seddon would comprehensively survey the geology, botany and history of settlement in the Swan River coastal plain. John O'Brien, the manager of The University of Western Australia Press

27 The remark was made to me in 1969; as Dean of the Faculty of Arts at that time I was supporting his promotion.

28 Academic transcript in UWA Archives S.702:1-3.

29 Gilbert White, *Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne,* B. White & Son, 1789.

30 G. Seddon, *Swan River Landscapes,* University of Western Australia Press, 1970.

31 ibid., p. 73.

was somewhat perturbed about this ambitious project, warning that 'the market could be flooded with environmental studies in the next year or two.'[32] His fears were groundless. In any case no other single academic in Australia could have written anything similar. *Sense of Place* appeared punctually in 1972.[33] Perhaps the size of the handsomely produced book told against a widespread circulation, but it amply reinforced the lessons of *Swan River Landscapes.* Henceforth Seddon's ideas were to gain increasing currency in official and public thinking about the Western Australian environment.

But Seddon was no longer in Western Australia. He had long felt undervalued, and a second application for promotion failed in 1970.[34] Other opportunities were forming. In February 1970 Brodie Hall approached the vice-chancellor of The University of Western Australia, Sir Stanley Prescott, with a proposal. The Western Mining Corporation wished to celebrate the opening of its nickel refinery at Kwinana in September 1970. Instead of holding a costly opening ceremony the company wanted to fund a chair in environmental studies. It would be the first such dedicated professorship in Australia. Prescott gave the idea two or three weeks of consideration before responding:

> There is a very real need in Australia to ensure that the development of our natural resources is undertaken wisely and economically, with due regard to the long-term biological, economic and psychological consequences as well as the need for conservation and regeneration of resources.[35]

Prescott told Brodie Hall that the proposed chair would be welcomed at The University of Western Australia, especially the Department of Zoology, but the barriers between disciplines might inhibit the development of environmental studies. On the other hand, a second university for Western Australia was in the process of formation and its charter would encourage multidisciplinary studies. Prescott considered that the new university would be a more appropriate home for environmental studies. So it happened that through this act of self-denial (probably taken by Prescott without much consultation) there would be a foundation chair of environmental studies at the new Murdoch University. This decision fitted well with emerging national priorities. The University of Western Australia sent two delegates to a national conference convened at Canberra on 24–26 April on the subject of education and the environmental crisis. The conference recommended that environmental education at tertiary level should be a priority for the 1973–75 triennium.

The Murdoch University Planning Board was constituted in July 1970 under the chairmanship of the experienced Professor (Sir) Noel Bayliss, for many years professor of chemistry at The University of Western Australia. It was tacitly understood among members of the Planning Board that George Seddon would be invited to fill the chair of environmental studies, but nothing could be done

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32 J. O'Brien to Clews, 20 August 1971, UWA Archives, S.702:1.

33 G. Seddon, *Sense of Place,* University of Western Australia Press, 1972.

34 He expressed his feelings in G. Seddon to Benwell, 30 August 1969, UWA Archives, S.702:1.

35 S.L. Prescott to Brodie Hall, 11 March 1970, Murdoch University Archives, 03 05 003 002.

until Western Mining announced its benefaction in September. By then it was too late. In July Seddon received a letter inviting him to apply for the chair of history and philosophy of science which was about to become vacant at the University of New South Wales.[36] Seddon accepted. For nearly two decades he would be lost to Western Australia, going from New South Wales to become Dean of the Centre for Environmental Studies at the University of Melbourne from 1974 to 1987, and undertaking extensive studies on the Snowy River system.[37] He was eventually to return to the University of Western Australia, a nationally respected authority; but meanwhile environmental studies at Murdoch University would take other directions.

In attempting to define the ground that would be covered in its environmental studies programme the Murdoch University Planning Board did not accord high priority to history.[38] At first Bayliss told Sir Lindesay Clark, the chairman of the Western Mining Corporation, that the professor would be 'confronted with problems of conservation, biology, anthropology and economics'.[39] By the end of 1971, following the appointment of Stephen Griew as first Vice-Chancellor, Bayliss saw the choice as lying between an ecologist or an appointee proficient in systems analysis. He had to be reminded by Oscar Oeser, an experienced sociologist who was Western Mining's academic adviser, that in a multidisciplinary school of environmental studies the biological sciences and the social sciences should both be represented. Oeser also urged the creation of a postgraduate school.[40]

Eventually in December 1972 the chair was accepted by the 45-year-old Desmond O'Connor. Educated as a surveyor and engineer in New South Wales, O'Connor was then serving as the chief environmental science director in the United States Army Research Office, where his responsibilities included the supervision of a research programme on environmental quality preservation and pollution abatement as well as resource development and inventory management. O'Connor soon attracted some good young staff, among them Tom Lyons and Peter Newman, who would become an influential authority on urban planning and public transport systems. The programme formed part of a School of Biological and Environmental Sciences.

In the early years of Murdoch University the environmental studies programme made its impact a little slowly. This was partly because the university did not do enough to keep Western Mining informed and encouraged about its progress—although the company at no time showed the slightest wish to exert pressure about the research agenda—and partly because a few of O'Connor's colleagues in the social sciences looked askance at his US Army background on ideological grounds.

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36 J.B. Thornton to G. Seddon, UWA Archives, S702.1.

37 G. Seddon, *Searching for the Snowy: An Environmental History*, Allen & Unwin, 1994.

38 Although I was a member of the Murdoch University planning Board I made no input when this issue was under discussion because I was overseas on study leave for the whole of 1971.

39 N. Bayliss to L. Clark, 15 September 1970, Murdoch University file, 03 05 003 002, 96.1.5.

40 N. Bayliss to O. Oeser, 1 December 1971, Murdoch University file, 03 05 003 002, 96.1.5; Oeser to Bayliss, 10 December 1971, Murdoch University file, 03 05 003 002, 96.1.5.

No such inhibitions prevented co-operation between the history programme at Murdoch and the environmental scientists. I had accepted the foundation chair of history at Murdoch in 1973 and was attracted by the possibility of establishing a course in Australian environmental history. A visit to the United States in March-April 1974 enabled me to acquaint myself with the work of the new generation of American environmental historians such as Roderick Nash. Elsewhere in Australia a burgeoning interest in environmental studies was stimulating publication from various sources. George Seddon himself convened a cross-disciplinary conference in Canberra.[41] In 1976 J.M. Powell published *Man and Landscape in Australia 1788–1914* opening up the hitherto neglected theme of the contributions to environmental policy of public servants, engineers, and public-spirited primary producers.[42] Activists in the environmental movement wrote of their campaigns.[43] Suddenly there was an ample choice of source materials for an undergraduate course.

Australian Environmental History, first taught at Murdoch University in 1976, presented a challenge in that about half the students undertaking the course were drawn from the environmental science stream and the other half from the social sciences and humanities. Each group was accustomed to different methods of tuition and assessment, so that lectures had to be crafted at a level intelligible to all comers. Assessment was based on essays and assignments suited to the students' backgrounds. The course was designed so that attention would be given to the built environment as well as to the bush and farmland which were more usually seen as the concern of environmentalists. After the course had been running for a few years I was invited to shape its materials into a book, *Spoils and Spoilers,* published as part of Allen & Unwin's 'Australian experience' series edited by Heather Radi.[44] Its scope complemented Powell's work and was used as an introductory text in several universities.

Two years before the appearance of *Spoils and Spoilers*, Western Australia celebrated the 150th anniversary of European settlement in 1979 with a series of fourteen volumes on various aspects of the State's past and present. By now the growth of environmental awareness had advanced to the point where it was taken for granted that one volume would be devoted to 'environment and science' under the editorship of Brian J. O'Brien, the first chairman of Western Australia's Environmental Protection Authority.[45] Apart from one chapter entitled 'Changing Patterns of Health' most of the contributions were ecological in their approach, including a chapter on historical background by David Hutchison and myself. In his conclusion, O'Brien wrote wryly: 'It is well known that the

41 The essays in this conference were published in G. Seddon & M. Davis (eds), *Man and Landscape in Australia,* Australian Government Publishing Service, 1976.

42 J.M. Powell, *Environmental Management in Australia 1788-1914*, Oxford University Press, 1976.

43 For example, R. and V. Routley, *Fight for the Forests,* Australian National University, Research School of Social Sciences, 1973.

44 G. Bolton, *Spoils and Spoilers: Australians Make Their Environment, 1788-1980,* George Allen & Unwin, 1981, 2nd ed., 1992.

45 B.J. O'Brien (ed.), *Environment and Science,* University of Western Australia Press, 1979.

one thing man learns from history is that man does not learn from history.'[46] He identified the problems which would confront Western Australia's future growth: urban sprawl, pressure on water resources, the loss of wetlands, the spread of salinity. He believed that during the 1970s environmental science had come to maturity in Western Australia, and that it was not yet impossible to meet these challenges. His final comment stressed the importance of the historical record:

> Most firm of all, though, I believe that there are enough lessons for us from the past 150 years about the effects of man's settlement on the environment of Western Australia for adequate environmental management to be achieved in the future.[47]

More than thirty years later the challenges remained, and the role of the historians was no less important.

46 ibid., p. 308.
47 ibid., p. 314.